

Augustus and the women of Akmoneia

Peter Thonemann

Piecing together our picture of the ancient world can be a tricky business and often ancient historians have to make tiny fragments of evidence ‘speak’ through a combination of careful interpretation, parallels or context, and historical imagination. Here Peter Thonemann does just that by showing that a single inscription from a remote part of the Roman Empire might shed new light on the controversial topic of women’s rights in antiquity and offer a challenge to the traditional picture of women being totally excluded from political life.

It’s a man’s world

In the Greek and Roman worlds, politics was a job for men. Aristophanes’ comedies *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*, in which confident and assertive women take over the running of the Athenian state, made their audiences laugh precisely because the scenario was so unlikely. For a fifth-century Greek man, the idea of women voting in the Athenian assembly would be as absurd as the idea of the birds founding a city among the clouds (the theme of another of Aristophanes’ plays, the *Birds*). The Romans took exactly the same view. In the Late Republic, we need only think of the prejudice and hatred inspired at Rome by the strong female queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, Horace’s ‘deadly freak’ (*fatale monstrum*). Even those wives and mothers of Roman emperors who wielded some political influence, such as Livia and Agrippina the Younger, could only do so through their husbands and sons; they enjoyed no official political powers in their own right. For both Greeks and Romans, a woman’s place was in the home, not the voting booth.

Going against the flow in a Turkish backwater

A startling exception to this depressing picture has recently emerged in a very unexpected place. Akmoneia was a small provincial market-town in central Turkey, high up in the cool wooded hills of the region known in ancient times as Phrygia. Little is known of the town’s history before the first century B.C.; ancient writers were not interested in the lives of the shepherds and farmers of these obscure

highlands. In the last years of the Roman Republic, increasing numbers of Roman businessmen and their families settled at Akmoneia alongside the original Greek inhabitants of the town. The Romans seem to have used the town as a centre of the slave-trade, where Roman slave-dealers could buy up cheap stock from central and eastern Turkey before shipping them on to Italy.

In 1955, a young English archaeologist called Michael Ballance copied and photographed a Greek inscription at the site of Akmoneia. The inscription has long since been lost, and is now known only from Ballance’s copy. Ballance himself never published the text, and it only appeared in print for the first time in late 2010. It reads as follows:

The women, both Greek and Roman, honoured Tatia daughter of Menokritos, also known as Tryphosa (‘Dainty’), the wife of Menodotos son of Menelaos, also known as Sillon (‘Squinty’), the High Priestess, who has acted as their benefactress under all circumstances, in recognition of all her virtue. The following people were responsible for setting up (the statue): Krates son of Menokritos, also known as Menelaos; Publius Petronius Epigenes; Menokritos son of Agathokles. Year 91.

From Women’s Institute to the town council?

Most of this inscription is pretty dull stuff. The stone records how, in Year 91 of the local calendar (late A.D. 6 or early A.D. 7,

late in the reign of Augustus), a marble portrait statue of a local priestess, Tatia, was set up in recognition of her virtuous behaviour and various unspecified good deeds. Apparently both she and her husband were generally known by their nicknames, Dainty and Squinty – this was clearly a town where everyone knew everyone else.

But the real interest of the inscription lies in its first line, which reveals a political set-up at Akmoneia which is simply astonishing. It was not the men, but the women of the town, both the local Greeks and the immigrant Romans, who were responsible for honouring Tatia. Most important of all, the fact that the honours for Tatia were put into effect by three men known to have been members of the local civic government (Krates, Petronius and Menokritos) shows that this body of women was not just an informal private association, a local Women’s Institute or pressure group. At Akmoneia, in the last years of the reign of Augustus, the women had invaded the local government itself; to all appearances, Aristophanes’ fantasy had come true.

We need to be careful, though. This inscription is a one-off. We have dozens of Akmoneian inscriptions from later in the first century A.D., none of which show any sign of women engaging in political activity. The emancipation of the Greek and Roman women of Akmoneia seems to have been short-lived. So what was it about the reign of Augustus which made this brief and extraordinary experiment possible?

Emulating Rome: the confusing figure of Livia

An answer can perhaps be found in the changing roles played by women in public life at Rome under Augustus. A central part of Augustus’ supposed ‘restoration’ of the Republic was his attempt to secure the loyalty and devotion of all the different parts of Roman society to him and his family. Just as Augustus himself claimed to be *princeps*, ‘first citizen’ of the Roman people, and his sons Gaius and Lucius were presented as *principes iuventutis*, ‘first among the young’, so Livia, Augustus’ wife, was hailed as *princeps*

femina, ‘first lady’ among Roman women. This idea of the Augustan household as a kind of ‘first family’ of the Roman state brought with it a new and unprecedented public role for Livia, who made herself very active in Roman public life. Lavish buildings were put up in her name (among them the Portico of Livia with its shrine of the goddess Concordia), and she is often found offering banquets and other charitable benefactions to the respectable wives of Rome. The married women themselves were organised into a semi-formal Order of *matronae*, with Livia at their head. This *ordo matronarum* headed by Livia was a female equivalent of the male *populus Romanus*, headed by Augustus himself.

Despite all that, the women of Rome remained entirely excluded from political life. We never find the Roman *ordo matronarum* organizing political meetings and passing decrees in honour of other women. And it is here that the new inscription from Akmoneia is so important. Augustus’ social programme did not in fact bring all that much change to the position of women in Roman society. But at first glance, the creation of a semi-formal female Order at Rome, grouped around a single powerful woman, could well have looked like a real revolution in women’s politics. I think that the people of Akmoneia, living in a small town at the opposite end of the Roman empire, but wanting to emulate the social fashions of the metropolis, *misunderstood* what was going on at Rome. The assembly of ‘Greek and Roman women’ at Akmoneia was an attempt to imitate the *ordo matronarum* at Rome; we find them honouring the city’s High Priestess, Tatia, ‘first lady’ of Akmoneia, as a kind of local equivalent of Livia. In fact, through trying to keep up with social changes at Rome, the Akmoneians had got it completely wrong – giving women the vote was not the point of Augustus’ reforms at all. No wonder the Akmoneians dropped the idea so quickly.

Calling time on a short-lived experiment

Nonetheless, none of that ought to obscure the real, revolutionary significance of the Akmoneian experiment. The decree of the women of Akmoneia for Tatia reminds us that there was nothing necessary or inevitable about the exclusion of women from public life in the Greek and Roman world. When the male inhabitants of a small town in the Roman provinces heard (wrongly, as it turns out) that the women of the city of Rome had been granted collective political rights, they promptly admitted their own wives and daughters into political life. In the end, the experiment came to nothing; no doubt the

Roman provincial governor quietly corrected their mistake, and everything swiftly returned to normal. But it seems to me that this remains a profoundly important moment in the history of the ancient world. It is all too easy for us today to justify or explain away the institutionalized sexism of Greek and Roman society: ‘they didn’t know any better’; ‘that was just how it was in those days’; ‘we can’t judge them by our own standards’. Of course, it was not the Romans’ fault that Mary Wollstonecraft, who championed the rights of women in the eighteenth century, and Emmeline Pankhurst, who led the Suffragette movement at the turn of the twentieth century, were not born until a millennium and half after the fall of the Roman empire. But the short-lived political emancipation of the women of Akmoneia shows that the Greeks and Romans *could* have chosen to give women a say in running their communities; it was simply that, in most places, and most times, they chose not to. Then, as now, a better and more equal politics was possible; and for reminding us of that, if nothing else, the Akmoneian women deserve their place in history.

Peter Thonemann teaches ancient history at Wadham College, Oxford. Peter publishes this inscription in Journal of Roman Studies 100 (2010).